The CENTURY MAGAZINE

Vol. 105 *December*, 1922 No. 2

The Thin Queen of Elfhame

By James Branch Cabell

Drawings by Rea Irvin

How many silken ladies wept, well out of eyeshot of their husbands, when it was known that courteous Anavalt had left Count Emmerick's court, remains an indeterminable matter; but it is certain the number was large. There were, in addition, three women whose grieving for him was not ever to be ended: these did not weep. In the meanwhile, with all this furtive sorrowing some leagues behind him and with a dead horse at his feet, tall Anavalt stood at a sign-post and doubtfully considered a rather huge dragon.

"No," the dragon was saying comfortably; "no, for I have just had dinner, and exercise upon a full stomach is unwholesome. So I shall not fight you, and you are welcome, for all of me, to go your ways into the Woods of Elfhame."

"Yet what," says Anavalt, "if I were to be more observant than you of your duty and of your hellish origin? And what if I were to insist upon a fight to the death?"

When dragons shrug in sunlight, their bodies are one long, green, glittering ripple.

"I should be conquered. It is my business to be conquered in this world, where there are two sides to everything, and where one must look for reverses. I tell you frankly, tired man, that all we terrors who keep colorful the road to the Elle Maid are here for the purpose of being conquered. We make the way seem difficult, and that makes you who have souls in your bodies the more determined to travel on it. Our thin queen found out long ago that the most likely manner of alluring men to her striped windmill was to persuade men she is quite inaccessible."

Said Anavalt:

"That I can understand; but I need no such baits."

"Aha, so you have not been happy out yonder where people have souls? You probably are not eating enough; so long as one can keep on eating regularly, there is not much the matter. In fact, I see the hunger in your eyes, tired man."

Anavalt said:

"Let us not discuss anybody's eyes, for it is not hunger, or indigestion either, which drives me to the Wood of Elfhame. There is a woman yonder,

Copyright, 1922, by The Century Co. All rights reserved.

dragon, a woman whom ten years ago I married. We loved each other then, we shared a noble dream. To-day we sleep together and have no dreams. To-day I go in flame-colored satin, with heralds before me, into bright, long halls where kings await my counsel, and my advising becomes the law of cities that I have not seen. The lords of this world accredit me with wisdom, and say that nobody is more shrewd than Anavalt. But when at home, as if by accident, I tell my wife about these things, she smiles not very merrily. For my wife knows more of the truth as to me and my powers and my achievements than I myself would care to know, and I can no longer endure the gaze of her forgiving eyes and the puzzled hurt which is behind that forgiveness. So let us not discuss anybody's eyes."

"Well, well," the dragon returned, "if you come to that, I think it would be more becoming for you not to discuss your married life with strangers, especially when I have just had dinner and am just going to have a nap."

With that the evil worm turned round three times, his whiskers drooped, and he coiled up snugly about the sign-post which said, "Keep Out Of These Woods." He was a time-worn and tarnished dragon, as you could see now, with no employment in the world since men had forgotten the myth in which he used to live appallingly; so he had come, in homeless decrepitude, to guard the Wood of Elfhame.

Anavalt thus left this inefficient and out-moded monster. Anavalt went into the wood. He did not think of the tilled meadows or the chests of new-minted coin or the high estate which belonged to Anavalt in the world where people have souls. He thought of quite other matters as he walked in a dubious place. Here to the right of Anavalt's pathway were seen twelve in red tunics; they had head-dresses of green, and upon their wrists were silver rings. These twelve were alike in shape and age and loveliness; there was no flaw in the appearance of any, there was no manner of telling one from another. All these made a lament with small, sweet voices that followed the course of a thin and tinkling melody. They sang of how much better were the old times than the new, and none could know more thoroughly than did Anavalt the reason of their grieving; but since they did not molest him, he had no need to meddle with these women's secrets any more. So he went on, and nothing as yet opposed him; at most, a grasshopper started from the path, sometimes a tiny frog made way for him.

He came to a blue bull that lay in the road, blocking it. This beast appeared more lusty and more terrible than other bulls; all his appurtenances were larger and seemed more prodigally ready to give life and death. Courteous Anavalt cried out:

"O Nandi, now be gracious and permit me to pass unhindered toward the striped windmill."

"To think," said the bull, "that you should mistake me for Nandi! No, tired man, the Bull of the Gods is white, and nothing of that serene color may ever come into these woods." And the bull nodded very gravely, shaking the blue curls that were between his cruel horns.

"Ah, then, sir, I must entreat your forgiveness for the not unnatural

error into which I was betrayed by the majesty of your appearance."

While Anavalt was speaking, he wondered why he should be at pains to humor an illusion so trivial as he knew this bull to be. For this, of course, was just the ruler of the Kittle cattle which everywhere feed upon the dew pools. The Queen of Elfhame, in that low estate to which the world's redemption had brought her, could employ only the most inexpensive of retainers; the gods served her no longer.

"So you consider my appearance majestic! To think of that, now!" observed the flattered bull, and he luxuriously exhaled blue flames. "Well, certainly you have a mighty civil way with you, to be coming from that overbearing world of souls. Still, my duty is, as they say, my duty; fine words are less filling than moonbeams; and, in short, I do not know of any good reason why I should let you pass toward Queen Vae."

Anavalt answered:

"I must go to your thin mistress because among the women yonder whose bodies were not denied to me there is one woman whom I cannot forget. We loved each other once; we had, as I recall that radiant time, a quaint and callow faith in our shared insanity. Then somehow I stopped caring for these things; I turned to matters of more sensible worth. She took no second lover; she lives alone. Her beauty and her quick laughter are put away, she is old, and the home of no man is glad because of her, who should have been the tenderest of wives and the most merry of mothers. When I see her, there is no hatred in the brown eyes which once were bright and roguish, but only forgiveness and a puzzled grieving. Now there is in my mind no reason why I should think about this woman differently from some dozens of other women who were maids when I first knew them, but there is in my mind an unreason that will not put away the memory of this woman's notions about me."

"Well," said the bull, yawning, "for my part, I find one heifer as good as another; and I find, too, that in seek-

ing Queen Vae one pretext is as good as another pretext, especially from the mouth of such a civil gentleman. So do you climb over my back, and go your way to where there are no longer two sides to everything."

Thus Anavalt passed the king of the Kittle cattle. Anavalt journeyed deeper into the Wood of Elfhame. No trumpets sounded before him as they sounded when the Anavalt who was a great lord went about the world where people have souls; and the wonders which Anavalt saw to this side and to that side did not disturb him, nor he them. He came to a house of rough-hewn timber, where a black man, clothed in a goat-skin, barked like a dog and made old gestures. This, as Anavalt knew, was the Rago; within the house sat cross-legged at that very moment the Forest Mother, whose living is innocent of every normal vice, and whose food is the red she goat and men. Yet upon the farther side of the home of perversity were to be seen a rusty nail in the pathway and bits of broken glass, prosaic relics which seemed to show that men had passed this place.

So Anavalt made no reply to the obscene enticements of the Rago. Anavalt went sturdily on to a tree which in the stead of leaves was overgrown with human hands; these hands had no longer any warmth in them as they caught at and tentatively fingered Anavalt, and presently released him.

Now the path descended amid undergrowth that bore small purple flowers with five petals. Anavalt came here upon wolves that went along with him a little way. Running, they could not be seen, but as each wolf leaped in his running, his gray body would show momentarily among the green bushes that instantly swallowed it; and these wolves cried hoarsely, "Abiron is dead!" But for none of these things did Anavalt care any longer, and none of the peculiarities of Elfhame stayed him until his path had led farther downward and the roadway had become dark and moist. Here were sentinels with draggled yellow plumes, a pair of sentinels at

whom Anavalt looked only once; then with averted head he passed them, in what could not seem a merry place to Anavalt, for in the world where people have souls he was used to mirth and soft ease and to all such delights as men clutch desperately in the shadow of death's clutching hand. In this place Anavalt found also a naked boy whose body was horrible with leprosy. This malady had eaten away his fingers, so that they could retain nothing, but his face was not much changed.

The leper stood knee-deep in a pile of ashes, and he demanded what Anavalt was called nowadays.

When courteous Anavalt had answered, the leper said then:

"You are not rightly called Anavalt. But my name is still Owner of the World."

Said Anavalt, very sadly:

"Even though you bar my way, ruined boy, I must go forward to the Elle Maid."

"And for what reason must you be creeping to this last woman? For she will be the last, as I forewarn you, tired man, who still pretend to be Anavalt—she will be the last of all, and of how many!"

Anavalt answered:

"I must go to this last love because of my first love. Once I lay under her girdle, I was a part of the young body of my first love. She bore me to her anguish, even then to her anguish. I cannot forget the love that was between us. But I outgrew my childhood and all childishness; I became, they say, the chief of Manuel's barons, and my living has got me fine food and garments and tall servants and two castles and a known name, and all which any reasonable mother could hope for her son. Yet I cannot forget the love that was between us or our shared faith in what was to be. Today I visit this ancient woman now and then, and we make friendly talk together about everything except my wife, and our lips touch, and I go away. That is all. And it seems strange that I was once a part of this woman, I who have never won to or desired real intimacy with any one; and it seems strange to hear people applauding my wisdom and high deeds of statecraft and in all matters acclaiming the success of Anavalt. I think that this old woman also finds it strange. I do not know, for we can understand each other no longer. I only know that, viewing me, there is in this old woman's filmed eyes a sort of fondness even now, and a puzzled grieving. I only know that her eyes also I wish never to see any more."

"Still, still, you must be talking Œdipean riddles," the leper answered. "I prefer simplicity; I incline to the complex no longer. So, very frankly, I warn you, who were Anavalt, that you are going, spent and infatuate, toward your last illusion."

Anavalt replied:

"Rather do I flee from the illusions of others. Behind me I am leaving the bright swords of adversaries and the more deadly malice of outrivaled friends and the fury of some husbands, but not because I fear these things. Behind me I am leaving the puzzled eyes of women that put faith in me, because I fear these unendurably."

"You should have feared them earlier, tired man, in a sunlit time when I, who am Owner of the World, would wonderfully have helped you. Now you must go your way, as I go mine. There is one who may, perhaps, yet

bring us together once again; but now we are parted, and you need look for no more reverses."

As he said this, the ruined boy sank slowly into the ash-heap and so disappeared, and Anavalt went on through trampled ashes into the quiet midst of the wood. Among the bones about the striped windmill that is supported by four pillars the witless Elle Maid was waiting.

She rose and cried:

"You are very welcome, Sir Anavalt. But what will you give Maid Vae?"

Anavalt answered:

"All."

"Then we shall be happy together, dear Anavalt, and for your sake I am well content to throw my bonnet over the windmill."

She took the red bonnet from her head and turned. She flung her bonnet fair and high. So was courteous Anavalt assured that the Queen of Elfhame was as he had hoped. For when seen thus, from behind, the witless queen was hollow and shadow-colored, because Maid Vae is just the bright, thin mask of a woman, and, if looked at from behind, she is like any other mask. So when she faced him now and smiled, and, as if in embarrassment, looked down and pushed aside a thigh-bone with her little foot, then Anavalt could see that the Elle Maid was, when properly regarded, a lovely and most dear illusion.

He kissed her. He was content. Here was the woman he desired, the woman who did not exist in the world where people have souls. The Elle Maid had no mortal body that time would parody and ruin, she had no brain to fashion dreams of which he would fall short, she had no heart that he would hurt. There was an abiding peace in this quiet Wood of Elfhame wherein no love could enter, and nobody could, in consequence, hurt anybody else very deeply. At court the silken ladies wept for Anavalt, and three women were not ever to be healed of their memories; but in the Wood of Elfhame, where all were soulless masks, there were no memories and no weeping, there were no longer two sides to everything, and a man need look for no reverses.

"I think we shall do very well here," said courteous Anavalt as yet again he kissed Maid Vae.